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SUBJECT: ALGERIA SPEAKS OUT ON MAURITANIA COUP

REF: ALGIERS 906

11. (U) MFA Minister-Delegate for Maghreb and African Affairs Abdelkhader Messahel (U/S equivalent) met with Mauritanian Special Envoy General Mohamed Ould Cheikh Mohamed Ahmed during an August 13 meeting in which the General passed a letter from coup leader General Abdelaziz addressed to President Bouteflika. Algerian state television quoted MFA officials who said Messahel underscored Algeria's opposition to unconstitutional regime change and referred again to the 1999 decision adopted by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Algiers (reftel). According to Algerian state news and statements posted on the MFA's website, Messahel urged his Mauritanian interlocutors to reinstate Mauritania's constitutional institutions and seek a solution to the crisis through dialogue and consultation. The ministry statement added that Algeria viewed this approach as the only means to preserve social cohesion as well as Mauritania's unity, stability and security interests.

12. (U) Foreign Minister Mourad Medelci also publicly stated Algeria's position on Mauritania during an August 14 interview on Algerian state radio. Asked about Algeria's stance on the Mauritanian affair, Medelci prefaced his comment by saying that as a member of the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), Algeria regarded Mauritania as "a sister country," adding that relations were "good at all levels." Medelci went on to say that the August 13 visit of a Mauritanian delegation gave Algeria the opportunity to convey its support for previous OAU statements rejecting unconstitutional regime change. The independent Algerian media portrayed both the Messahel meeting and Medelci remarks in terms of the "refusal" of President Bouteflika to receive the Mauritanian envoy.

RELUCTANT HERO  
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13. (SBU) COMMENT: Medelci's and Messahel's remarks tracked closely what MFA Africa Director Lounes Magramane told us on August 13 (reftel). Based on Magramane's cool response to our request for a public statement, however, it seems that the arrival of the Mauritanian delegation prodded the Algerians to repackage their passive position on AU and UMA efforts for public consumption. Although Algeria's statements on Mauritania prompted kudos from some Western governments and regional observers interested in seeing Mauritania's neighbors increase pressure on General Abdelaziz, the irony of the Algerian government defending the sanctity of constitutional rule did not escape Algeria's most prominent political cartoonists. Ali Dilem's cartoon on

August 19 in the French-language daily Liberte depicted Bouteflika lecturing Mauritania while holding a dossier for his third term under the heading "Bouteflika is for the respect of the (Mauritanian) constitution." The cartoonist known as Le Hic took a similar jab at Bouteflika in his August 17 entry in Le Soir d'Algerie when he portrayed an irate Bouteflika refusing to recognize the Mauritanian coup while standing flanked by a panel of grim-faced Algerian generals.

DAUGHTON